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LEE QUARNSTROM

## He helps young get in step with their heritage

**M**Y STORY, I thought, heading for Watsonville last week, would be about the White Hawk Dancers and their upcoming trip to Japan. After all, it seems newsworthy when a local group that performs traditional dances of ancient Mexico gets invited to strut its stuff in Shingu, the Japanese sister city of Santa Cruz.

But after a few minutes chatting with Yermo Aranda, who teaches and counsels the three dozen or so young men and women who are the White Hawks, I realized that the story that interested me more was that of this remarkable man.

Yermo Aranda, it seems, is more than the organizer of a so-called "Aztec" dance troupe; he is a cultural philosopher and, I think, a spiritual guide as well. He is an artist, a muralist and a craftsman. And above all, he is a man who had made it his life's work to give the young people of his community a good sense of who they are, who they *really* are.

"I'm originally from National City, down by San Diego," said Aranda, a youthful-looking 50 years old. "I started learning about these pre-Columbian dances of Mexico back in 1974. Now I see this primarily as a way to preserve a portion of our culture of ancient Mexico — and to make it available to interested youth in

**T**HE WHITE Hawks, with their colorful costumes and feathered headgear, will spend 10 days in Japan as guests of Shingu.

The dance group is but one of many projects Aranda organizes for young Latinos. He is perhaps best known in the Pajaro Valley for the murals he and young apprentices have painted — by invitation — on schools and other facilities. Most of the murals feature aspects of Mexican and Indian history and ancient religious rituals. One of them is on the outside of Adelante, the Watsonville non-profit center where Aranda works out of a cluttered studio and office. Another is visible from Highway 1 near the drive-in movie theater in Santa Cruz.

I first heard of Aranda from Carlos Campos, a young journalist I know. He told me he has begun exploring his own cultural and spiritual roots with Aranda's help. Carlos, who writes for the bilingual *El Andar* in Santa Cruz, attends traditional Indian sweat lodge ceremonies organized by Aranda.

Aranda told me he became interested in sweat lodges as he sought a spiritual basis to his own life. His mother, he said, is of Mexican Huichole tribal extraction and his father, an artist, is a Yaqui and Apache from Arizona.

**I** AM making a connection with my indigenous heritage," Aranda said. "I am very much involved in traditional cultural activities."

Aranda and his family lived for seven years at Red Wind, a traditional indigenous community near San Luis Obispo. Members of native groups from throughout the country, as well as from Canada and Mexico, gathered there. He learned to sing Chumash and Pima and other tribal songs.

Most importantly, perhaps, he came to believe that "if kids have some kind of culturally relevant activities, we're going to see positive changes in them."

Aranda believes that the dancing and the singing and the ceremonies can give children pride and direction they may not get at home and certainly won't get on the streets.

"I know the White Hawks are not enough nor will we ever be enough," he told me. "But young people have hopes and dreams and this is something all of us are going to have to address if we want to be optimistic about our future."

*Lee Quarnstrom's column appears Mondays.*